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ABSTRACT

The problem of teaching the use of the verbs "ser" and "estar" in Spanish can be only partially addressed by current linguistic explanations. In the absence of rules that will enable the student to predict correct sentences using the verbs, the most effective teaching technique is to use a situational-functional approach providing students with many contrasts in different situation types and with different adjectives. Since textbook writers generally give minimal attention to "ser" and "estar," it is the teacher's job to increase students' exposure to these link verbs. A number of exercise types targeted to different proficiency levels can be used to emphasize the crucial factors of context and speaker intent. (MSE)

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SER AND ESTAR IN REVIEW

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This paper has two goals: first, to demonstrate the limitations of current textbook explanations of ser and estar and, second, to suggest some effective exercises and classroom activities to supplement textbook work. The focus will be ser and estar with adjectives since this is where most pedagogical problems arise.

The Problem with Linguistic Descriptions

Whether we are aware of it or not, every textbook explanation of ser and estar reflects a linguist's idea of what these verbs really mean (1). Each explanation tells the students something different and every description has its limitations. The exercises that follow the explanations generally reflect the perspective of what has been said. It is important, then, to look at these explanations to see exactly what they tell students.

The use of the link verbs ser and estar should concern all teachers of Spanish. The mistakes students make with these verbs are not only frequent and apparently unavoidable, but they may be of the type less tolerated by natives (2). Moreover, errors involving them carry messages that often embarrass and, worse, impede communication. Thus, we are not dealing with an esoteric grammar point that can be filed away as unimportant or ignored because it has little communicative impact.

Linguists have long grappled with the problem of ser and estar, but they have never been able to adequately describe the verbs to everyone's satisfaction. One problem is that linguists, and language teachers, for that matter, have to use "language" to explain "language." Many have tried to find the word or phrase that captures exactly what one or the other copula really means. Anyone who has ever made a mistake in trying to select an alternative item from a thesaurus, however, knows how difficult it is to come up with a true synonym for anything. Finding synonymous glosses for ser and estar is no easier, and the result is a "sort-of" approximation to their meaning.

Linguists, morecver, tend to look for the single meaning that underlies many different usages. Thus, estar seems to cue location in Está aquí, to indicate state in Está triste, and to be a grammatical auxiliary in está cantando. Despite the apparent differences in these usages, estar might be assigned one abstract meaning in all three cases. It might be suggested, for example, that the idea of location underlies all uses of estar (3). Although abstract linguistic explanations are excellent for giving insights into how various uses are related, they presuppose that one already knows the meanings involved. In addition, for each

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usage added, the single meaning must become more and more abstract. These definitions, therefore, offer little to the student who needs cues to indicate what does or does not exist.

Matters become more complicated when one understands just how abstract the meaning of ser and estar really are. One can't draw, point to, or describe a ser or an estar. Some linguists have even said that ser has no meaning at all, but is, rather, an "empty" form whose purpose is to carry the grammar on its endings (4). Rather than try to describe the indescribable, linguists often define abstracts in terms of how they change the meaning of some other item in the sentence. With ser and estar, this other item is generally the adjective. Each teacher, for example, may associate a favorite description of ser and estar with a change in the meaning of the adjective. Following are some of the most common examples:

1 With ser, the adjective is an intrinsic element of the noun; with estar, the adjective is an accidental element.

2 With ser, the adjective is a characteristic of the noun; with estar, the adjective is a state.

3 With ser, the adjective is a norm; with estar the adjective is a non-norm.

4 With ser, the adjective is atemporal or permanent; with estar, the adjective is changeable or temporary.

Although these "rules" describe, to differing degrees, how ser and estar behave, they cannot be used as recipes to form correct sentences. In other words, how an adjective will behave cannot be predicted by applying these rules. There are many different kinds of adjectives, and they respond in a myriad of ways depending upon context. Consider the sentence Están grandes (They are big). If we are referring to children, the implication may be that they have grown (i.e., changed: see example 4 above), but if they are shoes, no such inference can be drawn. With shoes, the implication is that they are not what we expected (i.e., not the norm: see example 3 above), or that they are too big for our feet. Where do all these subtle variations in meaning come from? Not from our rules, but from context, inference, and knowledge of the world.

Unfortunately for students, knowledge of the world is distinct for different cultures. It would be difficult to predict, for example, that a sentence such as Esta naranja es agria (This orange is sour) exists without the knowledge that there is a variety of orange that is characteristically sour. Moreover, many inferences get "stuck," i.e., an unusual meaning is inferred from context frequently enough to become almost hackneyed. Thus, the adjective verde, generally meaning "green," may also refer to "unripe" when occurring with estar. Advanced texts may contain long

lists of adjectives like verde that "change meaning when used with estar" (5). Actually, all adjectives have a different meaning with estar; those that are singled out as having "changed" are merely the non-predictable, metaphorical meanings that cannot be easily guessed. Thus, since most behavior adjectives such as bueno, malo, and cruel can be glossed as "is being good," 'is being bad," and "is being cruel" when used with estar, we could predict that Estoy orgulloso means "I am being haughty." Although this is a possible interpretation, the most common meaning is "I am pleased or satisfied" as in Estoy orgullosa de ser americana.

For pedagogical purposes, then, one can conclude that linguistic descriptions are not predictive. Contrary to our most fervent desires, these descriptions cannot be used as recipes that will enable our students to form correct sentences without error. What they can do is correctly guide the student to interpret why sentences occur with ser and estar after he or she knows what they mean. As is often the case, students' passive, interpretive ability has to precede and exceed their active ones.

The following section, therefore, will address the concepts needed for students to acquire the ability to use ser and estar accurately, and will compare these needs with current realities.

A New Perspective

Given the basic weaknesses of linguistic descriptions, two general rules of thumb seem to hold. First, minimize the damage: keep grammatical explanations short and clear. Second, practice what you teach: try to have your explanations correspond to your exercises.

Since many teachers are adopting situational-functional perspectives in their classes, such an approach might also be used for the presentation and practice of the link verbs. Instead of trying to describe what ser and estar "mean," inform students what they "do" (6). With ser, the speaker chooses to classify, define, or typify the noun. Sentences with ser answer questions such as "What kind is it?" or "What is it?" Sentences with estar answer the question "How does the speaker find or perceive the noun?" Estar, then is the "other" verb. It seems to work differently with various adjective types and derives much of its meaning from inference and context. This is an important point for the teaching of the two verbs and will be discussed more fully below.

The value of any functional approach is that speaker intention is underscored. When some of the most common explanations of ser and estar are used, students may not understand that the idea of speaker intention underlies all contrasts. If our rules are not seen in the light of this basic tenet, they may seem contradictory, and it is easy to understand why students may be confused. The idea of intention, for example, allows both verbs to

occur with adjectives such as joven, duro, and rico. Es joven exists despite the fact that youth can never really be atemporal. El acero está duro is common even though hardness is the norm for steel, and wealth never seems to be an intrinsic defining property, yet Es rico is very frequent. Apparent contradiction of this sort can be eliminated only if the student understands that verb selection depends upon what the speaker wishes to do with the sentence, and not on the meaning of the adjective. With Es joven and Es rico, the speaker is telling us what kind of person he or she is talking about. The result is that the adjectives are viewed as atemporal or norm. Thus, the intention thus evokes the meaning and not the reverse. Situationally, the speaker might use such sentences to identify an unknown person or to give a characterization. On the other hand, in El acero está duro, the speaker does not want to define or classify the steel as hard, but rather wants to make a commentary on how he or she perceives the steel. We infer that the hardness must be contrary to the speaker's expectations. Otherwise, why would the speaker want to comment on it? Such a sentence might be uttered, then, when one expects the steel to be softer, as if the speaker were trying unsuccessfully to melt the steel, or where, to his or her discomfort, the speaker had to sit on it.

This approach is not presented as a panacea for all ills involving the explanation of ser and estar. In fact, this approach is subject to the same limitations concerning the use of language-to-explain-language as all others. The presentation of a functional approach to ser and estar, however, does not in any way preclude instructors from mentioning what the adjective means when used with either verb. In other words, meaning can be couched within intention. In this way we can hedge our pedagogical bets by employing an eclectic approach and, at the same time, avoid the problems of misinterpretation that are based on students' lack of understanding of what the speaker is trying to do. More importantly, we will have a system that stresses intention-within-situation rather than meaning-within-sentence.

The understanding of situation and intention helps us explain why rules describing what ser and estar mean cannot be predictive. Estar is the other, non-characterizing verb. It says something above and beyond ser that can only be calculated from the meaning of the adjective along with a good dose of context, inference, and world knowledge. Where can the student get these essential ingredients? Only from adequate exposure to situations in which different adjective types are contrasted with the two verbs.

Compare the above prescriptions concerning student needs with what we ideally expect of students and what tools we give them to meet these expectations. A typical first-year text dedicates about two paragraphs to the description of ser and estar with adjectives and may have three or four adjectives in contrast in their accompanying exercises. If the teacher does nothing to supplement this

treatment, students will hardly be aware that the difference between ser and estar exists with adjectives and will not be able to monitor their use and manipulate them accurately.

Some Exercise Suggestions

In this section some guidelines for reasonable goals and some exercises that may be used to meet these goals are given.

The Beginning Levels

The difficulty in working with structures involving subtle differences in meaning lies in the fact that explanation, often too complicated to be given in Spanish, tends to outweigh student practice and use. One way to avoid both English and the loss of meaningful communication time in the classroom is to assign homework exercises designed to teach understanding. In this way, students can be given ample opportunity to increase monitoring skills with regard to the link verbs without sacrificing precious communication time.

Perhaps the best homework treatment of the copula in current texts is that of Briscoe, Lamadrid, and Phillips' Communicating in Spanish (7). The value of their presentation is found, not so much in the explanation of the difference between the two verbs, but in the pure amount of exposure to verb selection that students receive. The mainstay exercise of this text asks students to select the appropriate verb for contexts described in English. These contexts can be made into interesting reading materials since they can include cultural insights of all sorts. Moreover, good students can be exposed to thirty adjective contrasts in a fifteen-minute reading assignment, thereby increasing tenfold the number of monitoring decisions they would find in the average text. Since students are given a fifty percent chance of accurate verb selection, these exercises are both self-teaching and confidence building. Below are a few of these contexts that I have created for first year classes following the models found in Briscoe, et al. (Answers for all exercises that follow are underlined.)

Choose the correct verb. For the underlined verbs, circle s if you would use ser and e if you would use estar:

1 Quique is a Panamanian student who is visiting the U.S. He has never had blueberries before and wants to know what they are. A friend explains in Spanish. -Blueberries are a fruit. They are small, round, and sweet. s e

Later, Quique buys some blueberries. When he tastes one, he exclaims: My, they are sweet! s e

2 María del Refugio, a Bolivian, describes herself to a penpal. She writes: -I have Indian features. My skin is dark and my eyes are black. s e

Later, María falls ill to infectious hepatitis. She can't believe what she sees when she looks in the mirror. She exclaims: -My word, my eyes are yellow. s e

These contexts are useful whenever contrasts are possible. Although most adjectives occur with both ser and estar, there are a few that only appear with one or the other verb. Adjectives of nationality and religion, for example, for reasons of classification occur only with ser, and adjectives such as contento, lleno, desnudo appear only with estar. Many adjectives based on verbs (destruído, escrito, etc.) occur more readily with estar and contrast with ser only in the passive voice. In order to contrast these "resultant condition" adjectives with those that generally define or characterize, the following exercise types may be used:

Underline the adjective that does not define or classify the noun:

Apple: red, round, rotten
Door: rectangular, open, wooden
Pencil: sharpened, yellow, long

There are limitations to these exercise types. First, they are designed only to teach monitoring and to give students an idea of the variation found in the meaning of adjectives within context, particularly with estar. Fluent use of ser and estar, which is not addressed by these exercises, is best practiced in class.

Interesting situationalized classroom activities for ser are not hard to find since ser is associated with identity and characterization. One can ask students to describe whatever might be of personal interest to them: their families, pets, favorite rock stars, or even a description of themselves for pen pals. Objects are somewhat harder to characterize inasmuch as beginning students are limited in vocabulary. Nonetheless, with a vocabulary sheet that lists possible adjectives, students may be asked to make defining statements about visuals cued by the teacher. Thus, simultaneously with the showing of a picture of an apple, students may write: Las manzanas son rojas, having selected rojo from a field of several different adjectives on their sheets.

In contrast to activities with ser, those with estar do not lend themselves to composition-like exercises. Estar, the verb of non-characterization, is used with conditions, change, and personal reaction. Responses, although they tend to be one-liners, can be made personalized and siuational. In the following exercise, estar indicates change in physical or animic state. Students are

to complete sentences with original adjectives or with ones suggested on a handout:

> Después de un concierto, Olivia Newton-John (está cansada).
> Después de sacar una A en español, yo (estoy contenta).
> Cuando usa cosméticos Mary Kay, mi amiga (está bonita).
> Después de su dieta, Paco (está flaco).

None of these exercises is designed to work with or test the contrast between ser and estar. The danger inherent in them, therefore, is that students will associate the verb they select with the adjective, rather than with the contextualized meaning, or that, given that their attention is directed towards adjective meaning, they will not focus on the verb's selection, but rather on its mechanically repeated use.

This weakness can be remedied with some adjective types that lend themselves to contrast with visuals. Using faces or stick figures drawn at opposite ends of poster board, one can indicate the use of adjective pairs such as feo-bonito, pobre-rico, calvo-peludo, alegre-triste, flaco-gordo, blanco-tostado, etc. Between the two drawn figures, one must add something that logically signals a possible change. Thus, for one adjective set, we might have a 3-way sequence graphically indicating FEO + MAYBELLINE = BONITO. Pointing to the visual, we can stimulate conversation that manipulates the contrast between the verbs:

> Teacher: ¿Como es Isacris?
> Student: Es fea.
> Teacher: Sí, pero ahora usa Maybelline. ¿Qué tal hoy?
> Student: Está bonita.

Exercises of this type, however, are limited by the beginning student's restricted knowledge of vocabulary. Contrastive adjective pairs in beginning classes are confined to items indicating size, shape, color, and animic state. At the more advanced levels, where vocabulary is no longer constrained, problems with ser and estar increase in subtlety.

Advanced Classes

Few high school or college students ever reach the point where the ser/estar distinction needs no further clarification. Unfortunately, most advanced texts seem to review the old materials much better than they introduce the new. Thus, those adjectives that are less easily classified into semantic fields or whose meanings are not easily described tend to be ignored. Consider the following common absolute adjectives, which, although not easily distinguished by definitions of ser and estar, can be contrasted within context.

Underline s if you would use ser and e if you would use estar:

1 There are ten sentences on the board. Some are correct and others are incorrect. I ask a student to pick out the correct ones. He says: -Sentences 7, 8, and 12 are correct. s e

A teacher is correcting some papers. A student asks her if sentence 12 on his test is okay. The teacher answers: -It's correct. s e

2 There are two cars parked side by side. They are the same color, make, and model. A passerby remarks: -They're the same. s e

Mary's house has been broken into. The police are there trying to get information. They ask her if anything in the living room looks different. She answer: -No, it's the same. s e

Students can collect or create these kinds of contexts. Teachers can direct the activities by assigning adjective types or by selecting contexts from naturally produced written Spanish. If Spanish contexts are provided, the student can then be asked to prepare an explanation of why the copula used in the context is correct. He should, of course, include an explanation of a contrast with the opposing verb. Thus, students might be asked to explain es/está caro using the following text as a base:

> Tarsicio is given a bonus and comments on what he might do with it: -Mejor le compro a mi Angélica Verónica la estufa con que sueña desde que nos casamos--sólo que están recarísimas (8).

The student response would have to indicate that Las estufas están caras refers to the speaker's view of the price of ovens in comparison to, for example, the speaker's current salary or to last year's prices. In other words, it states how the speaker perceives the price of ovens on the current market. Las estufas son caras, on the other hand, merely states what kind of items ovens are--in this case, high-priced items.

Adjectives that have different translations in English when used with the two verbs are also a problem. Actually this phenomenon is more common than the ten or so adjectives that are generally listed in review texts might seem to indicate and, therefore, merits our attention. Teachers should collect instances of these cases and have students guess at possible interpretations within context.

> A drowned man is washed ashore. He is unrecognizable. The town's people wonder if it is one of them. "-Así que cuando encontraron el ahogado les bastó con mirarse los

> unos a los otros para darse cuenta de que estaban completos" (9).
>
> Fonacot, a government agency, is going to sell items to the workers from a catalogue at a reduced rate. A worker, who is overjoyed, exclaims: "-¡Qué padre va a estar eso! ¿Y dónde puedo conseguir un catálogo de ésos?" (10).

An advanced student should be able to deduce from context that estaban completos refers to the notion that the drowned man was not one of the town's people, and that, in the second case, está padre is comparable to the evaluative está bueno. Students who are successful at this type of activity hone the inferential skills that are so necessary for any comprehension task. Moreover, their attention is focused on the use of the copula within context. Without this ability to interpret contextually, the student never passes beyond a very elementary understanding of the copula's use.

Conclusion

In this paper, one purpose was to demonstrate why the difficult problem of ser and estar can be only partially addressed by current linguistic explanations. In the absence of rules that will enable the student to predict the existence of correct sentences using ser and estar, the best pedagogical treatments will be those that inundate the student with a multitude of contrasts covering many different adjective and situation types. Textbook writers, who must concern themselves with the bulk of the overall text, often minimize the ser and estar experience. It is, therefore, the job of teachers to supplement their texts by giving the student as much exposure to the link verbs as time will permit.

The final task in this paper was to outline a few of the many possible exercise types that can be used for text expansion. The choice of activities was constrained to those that demonstrated the two factors of context and speaker intent, for no matter what the meaning of ser and estar ultimately turns out to be, these two factors will inevitably play a major role.

Notes

1 For a survey of the more traditional literature, much of which forms the base of our pedagogical explanations, see the first section of R. Navas Ruiz, Ser y estar: estudio sobre el sistema atributivo del español (Salamanca: University of Salamanca, 1977).

2 C. Gail Guntermann, "A Study of the Frequency and Communicative Effects of Errors in Spanish," Modern Language Journal 62 (1978): 249-253.

3 Mercedes Roldán, "Towards a Semantic Characterization of Ser and Estar," Hispania 57 (1974): 68-75. Roldán views all meanings of estar as asserting "the presence of the subject at a specific space or time" (p. 74). This would include estar locative adverb, but it also refers, by extension, to "the presence of the subject in the state or condition denoted by the predicate at the time specified by the subject" (p. 74). In other words, one meaning is extended to underlie all usages.

4 See G. DeMello, "The Semantic Values of Ser and Estar," Hispania 62 (1979): 338-40. DeMello states that "the difference between Juan es alto and Juan está alto lies precisely in the differing semantic values of es and está in these sentences. Es, as pointed out above, means nothing. Thus Juan es alto means only that alto is related to Juan and that Juan is related to alto; no further semantic connotation is present. (The presence of the verb in this sentence is, however, of value in its expression of tense [es vs. será], mood [es vs. sea] and, in the past tense at least, aspect [era vs. fue])" (339-340).

5 For an example, see Yolanda Solé and Carlos Solé, Modern Spanish Syntax (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath: 1977).

6 Luis Crespo, "Ser and Estar: The Solution of the Problem," Hispania 32 (1949): 509-516.

7 L. Briscoe, et al, Communicating in Spanish (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin: 1984).

8 Los Supermachos, Editorial Meridiano, December 18, 1980, p. 12.

9 Gabriel García Márquez, "El ahogado más hermoso del mundo," in Campo Abierto, eds. Treacy and Hall (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin; 1984).

10 Los Supermachos, op. cit., p. 28.

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